

## S\$30m Fund to Help People with Disabilities and their Caregivers

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SINGAPORE: A S\$30-million fund has been created to support projects aimed at helping people with disabilities and their caregivers. This was announced by Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam at a community health screening event on Sunday (Oct 26).

The Tote Board, which provided the funds, will partner SG Enable and the National Council for Social Service, under the Social and Family Development Ministry, to deliver this initiative over the next five years. SG Enable is an agency set up by the Ministry of Social and Family Development to provide support to people with disabilities.

"Especially for the very significant proportion of persons with disabilities who are able to work in some way, able to be independent - that's a very important emphasis going forward - helping them in the transition from school to work. And helping them in subsequent life transitions - one important one that will be coming up before long is that parents will be getting older and some will pass on," said Mr Tharman.

"We want to ensure that persons with disabilities who were previously looked after by their parents have a way of managing, with community support as well as some independence of their own, using assistive devices and being able to be mobile, being part of the community."

S\$26 million of the S\$30-million fund will be set aside to support projects and new innovations in areas such as data and technology, for instance a speech-generating device that reads out words when buttons are pressed. It is typically used to help those with communication impairments.

Dr Wong Meng Ee, co-founder of iC2 PrepHouse, a resource centre for the visually impaired, said building public awareness of disability issues is also important. "There needs to be knowledge to be accessible to teachers, to specialists, professionals, who work with persons with visual impairment for example," he explained.

"Just to add on to what Dr Wong said, the first thing he mentioned was about awareness, and frankly, there isn't enough awareness right now about assistive devices," said Mr Tharman. "Some things people know about - motorised wheelchairs and so on. But in general, we don't have much awareness of the whole range of assistive devices that are available and are being developed. The demand will be there once the awareness is there. Secondly, we want to encourage more innovation and more providers of services for the disabled. One of the things that we will do is to call for proposals from providers, VWOs and commercial companies, to come up with ideas that can be adopted," Mr Tharman added.

S\$4 million from the fund will be channelled to support public education and awareness on disability issues. The National Council of Social Services (NCSS), which will be in charge of the public education campaign, said it will be targeting caregivers and youths.

"There aren't currently many students with special needs in mainstream schools. So as a result of that, sometimes our students don't have many opportunities to interact," said NCSS Deputy Chief Executive Officer Tina Hung. "So we would like to target the younger ones so that they will be equipped with how to interact with people with special needs. Because when we look at somebody and they are different from us... we ignore them because we don't know what to do or how to interact with them."

"The second group we would like to target is the caregivers because we feel that they are underserved. Often because it is a 24/7 'type of work' that they do, they are tremendously stressed. Sometimes they don't know where to go for help, they don't know where the resources are and how to get support," she added.

Helen Chong, a full-time homemaker who has a son with Down's syndrome, welcomed the initiative. "I hope that with the introduction of this initiative, more programmes can be developed to help children with special needs become more independent so as to alleviate stress on caregivers like myself," she said. "It will be great if there could be a one-stop centre set up for caregivers so that there could be a common space for us to go for information and support," she added.

The grant is open to organisations such as social enterprises, research centres and voluntary welfare organisations. Applications open from January next year.

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